

THE POET AND THE PAINTER: EXPLORING PERSONAL LANDSCAPES

a review by Michael Beadle

Kenneth Chamlee. *If Not These Things*. Kelsay Books, 2022.

—. *The Best Material for the Artist in the World*. Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2023.

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KENNETH CHAMLEE has served as the Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet for the North Carolina Poetry Society and teaches workshops for the Great Smokies Writing Program through UNC Asheville. He is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Logic of the Lost* (Longleaf Press, 2001) and *Absolute Faith* (Byline Press, 1999). A finalist in the 2017 James Applewhite Poetry Prize contest, his poem is in *NCLR* 2018.

If life is measured in moments, Kenneth Chamlee savors a full cup, brimming with possibilities and unpredictable adventures. One of his latest poetry collections, *If Not These Things*, muses on the mundane and metaphysical, on observations of neighbors and characters met along the road, and on the regrets, reflections, and rejoicings that come with fatherhood, marriage, and a long career of teaching.

Chamlee's poems call to mind the work of poet Ted Kooser, who charges his subjects with carefully chosen metaphors and precise imagery that turn everyday occurrences into magical flashbacks. In "Walking Home Past Sprinklers," Chamlee transforms the graceful shape and spray of sprinklers into leaping whales that feel as real as the mist that lands on your face as you pass by. "Kitchen Inventory" would fit perfectly with Michael McFee's masterful odes in *That Was Oasis* (2012; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013). Chamlee deftly describes basic kitchen accessories. A wire whisk becomes a "Hummingbird cage, fairy prison," while a wine bottle opener is a "Palm derrick" with "silver arms of a priestess." Under this poet's distillation and inspection, the ordinary becomes evocative and unforgettable.

Showing versatility and a discerning eye, Chamlee sets up this three-part collection to include terse imagist compositions, persona poems, ekphrastic poems, an *Ars Poetica*, an Elizabethan sonnet, and sestains. At times the poet's ruminations drift toward the metaphysical and ethereal, emotional postcards that pon-

der over feelings and faraway distances rather than conveying specific experiences, as in "The Fossil Poem" and "Before the Fog Burns Off."

Childhood memories become a powerful touchstone for Chamlee's imagination. "Fantasia Afterthought" is a father's loving portrait of his son performing a young wizard's whirling flourishes like Mickey Mouse from Disney's *Fantasia*. In tune with the mood of the poem, the lines take on their own sway across the page as fantasy comes to life. The boy wields a thick pencil for a wand "lost in the myth of pure control, oblivious / to those dreams he will prod to life." Just as an inexperienced sorcerer's apprentice finds himself overwhelmed by the unrelenting spell of out-of-control magic, the father realizes his son's magic will eventually face real-world wizards who will threaten "to dash his work / to droplets and broom him / through the splintered air."

This theme of a child imagining continues in "Playing Death," where dyed berries become make-believe blood smeared across shirts as childhood friends act out overly dramatic deaths from biblical stories and TV shows. Chamlee describes these theatrical tragedies in vivid detail: "overlapped hands to the heart, spine arched, / knees sagging in a spiral of collapse, / a yodeled scream, the grimace without pain." No doubt, this bygone era of youthful innocence and the lost art of yard play has been replaced by video games (played indoors) and real-life mass shootings, an ominous onslaught of violence that's become all too familiar for today's youth.

Chamlee's poems portray humor and joy but also shame

and regret. In "The English Professor's Flag Football Game," a once gallant athlete now well past his prime enters a gridiron contest with aches and pains to churn out one more glorious run worthy of an ESPN highlight: "with each clumsy shift / and broken run, his agile mind is full / of blood and leather." If only more poets could capture such immortal spurts of fleeting victory. In "Match Play with Mr. D," a personified Grim Reaper tees off for a round of golf and "wins by a stroke" (pun intended after repeated hints of gallows humor). Death chain-smokes his way down the fairway, missing putts "shorter than an emphysemic breath" and hacking his ball from the rough, "swinging his nine-iron like a scythe."

In a clever expression of fatherly love and biting critique, Chamlee pays tribute to a daughter's boyfriends in "Counting My Daughter's Boyfriends on One Hand." Each digit from thumb to pinkie represents the characteristics that describe a different type of boyfriend, from the rich and "cocksure" suitor (index finger) to the (middle finger) brash beau who "honks from the street, then oils / to the door in a Busch t-shirt." The "Ring" finger paramour looks like a worthy prospect: "Opens doors and offers to mow. / Can make and take a joke." But then the daughter thinks, "He's so nice. And boring." Such a bland sentiment belies the inventiveness of Chamlee's poems. His work dazzles in metaphoric mastery, revels in stunning imagery, humbles itself in honest, human foibles, and boldly proclaims that each moment is worth preserving.

Chamlee's narrator rants about pestering squirrels, whiffing blindfolded at a piñata, fumbling around in a dark car while kissing, and hobbling over a pebble caught in his shoe. Surely, each of us can rattle off a litany of embarrassing episodes, ailments that appear more pronounced with old age, the slights we didn't deserve. But in a world beset by much darker perils – racial injustice, hate crimes, climate disasters, refugee crises, war, and corporate greed – a poet's imagination might also train itself to move beyond personal woes to engage with larger issues.

For more than a decade, Chamlee has been quietly toiling away on his own kind of magnum opus, a collection of poems exploring the life and times of the nineteenth-century landscape painter Albert Bierstadt. Chamlee's *The Best Material for the Artist in the World* examines Bierstadt's travels, triumphs, artistry, and adversity. These poems follow the artist's early life; his family's emigration from Prussia (Soingen, Germany) to New Bedford, MA; his studies in Düsseldorf, Germany, and with the Hudson River School; and his travels out west across



COURTESY OF KENNETH CHAMLEE

the Rocky Mountains and into the Sierra Nevadas in California. They also grapple with the misfortunes and doubts of a flawed man who carried privilege, passion, and daring ambition along with his palette and brushes.

Transmuting a painter's biography into a series of poems should come with its own set of warnings. Beware of idolizing your subject. Beware of burying yourself in mountains of research. Beware of regurgitating biographical events as poems and losing the reader with arcane anecdotes. Chamlee takes extra care to avoid such pitfalls. Rather than simply relying on the painter's point of view, he widens his lens to include poems in the persona of Bierstadt's family, his contemporaries, his friends, his critics, and even the modern-day gallery stroller. The result is a compelling documentary-in-verse revealing an incredible life spanning two centuries and two continents.



Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite, circa 1871–73 (oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 26 3/8) by Albert Bierstadt

Bierstadt's signature style – sweeping landscapes of towering mountains and gushing waterfalls – inspired a generation of explorers, naturalists, and environmentalists who became advocates for national parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone. At the height of his fame, Bierstadt earned medals, royal adoration (once holding a private audience with Queen Victoria), and financial success throughout the US and Europe. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, his grandiose and prodigious output (an oeuvre of more than five hundred paintings) was considered overly theatrical and out of touch with changing sensibilities. In North Carolina today, Bierstadt's paintings can be found in

the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh and the Reynolda House Museum in Winston-Salem. His *Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite* graces the cover of *You Are the River*, a 2021 collection of poems, stories and creative nonfiction written by some of North Carolina's best contemporary writers (published by the North Carolina Museum of Art).

In Chamlee's homage to Bierstadt, the poet takes his time, as any painter should, to capture just the right mood, just the right subtle language, just the right amount of scenery. In "Swiss Afternoon," we find the young painter attuning his eye to the bucolic subjects around Lake Lucerne, "to paint glowing sails of homeward boats, / the village spire white as a struck match, / fence-shadows slowly combing pastures." In "Boats Ashore At Sunset," a fishing village carries that timeless distillation of the artist's gaze. Drowsy boats float in a wonder-filled reverie and appear to "have pulled the wind ashore too, / where it rests wrapped in the sails till tomorrow."

Continuing to unravel Bierstadt's life in a linear progression, Chamlee invites us to explore America as a wave of immigrants, among others, headed west in the mid-1800s across the Great Plains in search of fortune, homesteads, and a new life. The title poem portrays Bierstadt's dusty travels and bitter hardships on the Overland Trail in an epic, five-page masterpiece set to nine-syllable lines with the cadence, period language, and scenery of 1859. Enduring rugged trails, Bierstadt discovers sheer bliss. In "First View – Chicago Lakes," Chamlee gives us the artist's first glimpse of magnificent vistas: "Clouds tickle and drip and when we crest / this timbered ridge I will ask that – Oh! / Sublime cirque! The Alps surpassed again!" Returning to his studio back east, Bierstadt portrayed an Edenic realm ripe for the taking, as many gold rushers, industrialists and land speculators would carve up this vast territory west of the Mississippi. First heading out west in 1859 and then again in 1863, Bierstadt marvels, through Chamlee's verses, at the wide open spaces: "How do you measure a measureless land, / a land empty of everything but wind and grit?"

Yet noticeably absent from this narrative of inevitable conquest (known as Manifest Destiny) was a story of native tribes – millions of men, women, and children, who lived and thrived on these lands for millennia. Swept clean from Bierstadt's paintings are the horrific accounts of geno-

cide, displacement, forced marches, disease, and the intentional US policy that slaughtered millions of buffalo, a major source of food and sustenance for Plains Indian tribes who resisted this westward expansion. Art critics back in Bierstadt's day bemoaned the idea that any Indians could be worthy subjects in a painting, believing that natural beauty was somehow tainted by their inclusion. Some of Chamlee's poems touch on the sad encounters Bierstadt would have faced seeing ragged bands of native families eking out an existence in the aftermath of such an overwhelming, government-sanctioned assault. But too often in these poems, as with Bierstadt's minimal use of Indians as subjects in his paintings, this human tragedy is relegated to more of a footnote, a cameo, a minor scene in a stanza. Indigenous families are portrayed as pitiful victims lacking the agency and resourcefulness of their white counterparts.

In Chamlee's poems, we see "begged faces of children" (from "The Best Material for the Artist in the World") and "the bounty of fleeing Indians" (from "The Unveiling"). Perhaps the most poignant vision of indigenous culture captured in Chamlee's poems is "Chief Rocky Bear Views *The Last of the Buffalo* in Paris, 1889," in which an Oglala chief takes a long gaze over a Bierstadt painting depicting a buffalo hunt. While the painting relives the thrill of the hunt, the chief is moved to a sacred duty to observe the buffalo's death. By the end of the poem, the reader becomes both voyeur and observer: we see the painting and how the chief sees the painting. Then comes the stark realization as one exits a darkened movie theater or turns away from a long gaze at a painting: reality can be suddenly jarring. The chief notes, "the buffalo are gone and I am / still a Lakota in a painted show." Again, the message seems to be that Native identity is trapped in death, loss, and even extinction.

Chamlee's poems don't shy away from Bierstadt's ambition, frustration, and indiscretion. Through intimate, diary-like portraits of Bierstadt, his friends, colleagues, and critics, Chamlee shows us the artist's pressures, public attacks, and insecurities. In the poem "Critical Difference," an outraged Bierstadt calls those who would disparage his work "guttersnipes" and "Jackanapes" Beginning this same poetic epistle to his wife, Rosalie, he declares of his

adversaries, "No oil is hot enough to boil them." In the book's title poem, Chamlee deftly imagines an undaunted Bierstadt wanting to make his mark on the world: "I lift a brand from our campfire, coax / its red nib, then sweep my initials / toward the lacework of stars above me."

Chamlee is at the height of his powers using ekphrasis, a poetic technique that seeks to re-imagine or respond to artwork. Through the subject material in these paintings, Chamlee digs deep into Bierstadt's restless mind, his doubts, and his most difficult struggles, including his wife's terminal bout with tuberculosis. While she convalesces in the Bahamas, where the more humid climate was supposed to ease her suffering, Bierstadt paints away, and Chamlee bestows lavish descriptions of tropical scenes: "Yellow jackfruit hang like moons / over the crab-legged shanty." Even a speculative poem filled with dark and destructive images – "What Not To Paint" – offers a startling list of images that would challenge any artist to pick up the brush: "rattlesnakes singing at the river ford / wagons keeled and wheeling air / gray faces of the drowned." Chamlee conjures the inner voice of Bierstadt so well it feels as if the two are one.

At the end, in "Monument," Chamlee pays one final tribute to Bierstadt. We see the painter's final resting place, and it's certainly not what the poet had hoped:

Not this slick, stunted thumb of tombstone.
A mausoleum perhaps, a monolith
staunch as a canyon wall, but not this
gessoed stump faced only with two dates
and the glare of opposing graves.

Perhaps Albert Bierstadt can rest a little easier in this unassuming gravesite knowing his legacy is well-preserved in Chamlee's poems. *The Best Material for the Artist in the World* offers a rich and complex study into the soul of one of America's greatest painters. Like a viewer gazing long and lovingly at a canvas masterpiece, Chamlee attunes our eyes to look more deeply at life, to study the grand mountain and the tiny brush-stroke, to discover the unexpected joy of intricacy and subtlety. ■